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ABSTRACT

It is believed that by focusing on the problems of advanced learners of English as a second language, implications can be drawn for issues in second language teaching and testing in general. Considerations are offered on the influence of structural linguistics and transformational generative linguistics as well as language acquisition theories on teaching and testing methodology. Tests which are a result of these ideas are criticized as overlooking considerations of validity, efficiency, scope, and meaningfulness. Wilkins' "notional syllabus" is suggested as a model of language testing whereby communicative tasks form the basis of what is termed "functional language analysis." For the employee who needs to use English in his job, language performance objectives should be based on job tasks, which require varying levels of language proficiency. A hierarchy of communicative functions, adapted from Fine and Wiley, is drawn up as a basis for further investigation into the nature of functional foreign language proficiency. (AM)

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Contextual Testing and Communicative Competence*

(Preliminary Version)

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In this paper we shall look at current issues in second language testing and propose a framework for dealing with them. We will focus principally on educated adult second language learners who must function in English in their professions. Such people are often found in international organizations, government service, multi-national corporations, and in universities. For the most part, they would be considered advanced students in that they are already functional, to some extent, in the second language. After being exposed to the linguistic knowledge in second language text books, they have generally had to fend for themselves or guess at the assumptions underlying books for native speakers of subjects such as public speaking, rhetoric, style, and composition. Told by their teachers how much they know, they are at a loss to explain how inadequate that linguistic knowledge is for the situations they face. Their tests generally show high scores in structure, vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension on foreign language proficiency batteries such as the CELT, ALIGU, and TOEFL. Though they are a special group, we feel that the issues which arise in

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working with them have a broader relevance to the teaching and testing situation than has previously been realized. This is because the inadequacies in most existing second language teaching and testing materials, which result from ignoring functional aspects of language and the structure of discourse, are so apparent on the advanced level of second language acquisition that there is no escaping the complexity of factors involved.

We shall put the present state of affairs into focus by taking a brief look at how linguistic theory and language acquisition theories have influenced teaching and testing instruments.

Structural linguistics and behaviorism combined to produce the audio-lingual methodology of language teaching, a legacy which the teaching field is still struggling to shake off. While acknowledging the sizable body of knowledge that structuralism contributed, we can safely say that today its limitations are at least as apparent as its contributions. Perhaps the most striking of these is the very elementary level of the linguistic data with which it dealt, the reliance on contrastive analysis, the nearly exclusive interest in the spoken language and in the purely mechanical aspects of language as a source of language instruction content. Except for question/answer pairs, attention centered on the sentence level, and contextual and discourse parameters were ignored. The tests that were produced were of the discrete point, objective type, designed to measure mechanical linguistic skills. This kind of test, the typical syllabus and classroom methodology all reinforced each other at one time, but that era of theoretical and applied equilibrium is long gone, and no new equilibrium has yet come along to replace it.

The way in which transformational generative linguistics upset the balance left many in a quandry. Generative theory did not point in any obvious way toward applications in language teaching and testing because, for one thing, it did not claim psychological reality for its grammatical descriptions. However, confusion about the relationship between linguistic models and language instruction became so great that, for example, some teachers at the 1973 Georgetown Roundtable advocated teaching transformational formulas to students of English as a second language. And, until recently, as in structuralism, interest continued to be focused on the sentence level. Attempts to formalize notions of a grammar as a self-contained unit with little attention to pragmatic mappings also limited the usefulness of generative theory. On the other hand, it did make applied linguists and many teachers aware of aspects of language which had sometimes been ignored. Particularly, stimulated by Chomsky's investigations into formal notions of linguistic creativity, they became more aware of creativity in language in a general way. Those teachers who devised ways of helping their students to use the second language creatively and spontaneously were still held to producing results on objective, discrete point tests. Teachers' input to linguists as sources of data and intuitions about language and the learning process was virtually nil.

In the past few years, a number of interesting hypotheses about how native and second languages are acquired and about language perception and production have emerged which have a great potential to influence attitudes toward classroom instruction and toward testing. Included in this group are claims:

a. that an expectancy grammar, which is notionally similar to Wood's augmented recursive transition network grammar, has a better potential to account for the psychological reality of language than any sort of formalism which has recently been considered,

b. that language perception is a process of analysis by synthesis, language production a process of synthesis by analysis,

c. that language learning consists of stages of inter-languages which are not defective grammars but complete systems composed of sets of hypotheses about the target language and which progressively approach native speakers' grammars,

d. that language learning and language use form a continuum,

e. that all aspects of second language acquisition, including those that drill and mechanical practice supposedly taught best, are more effectively taught in communicative situations,

f. that communication depends at least as much on linguistic and non-linguistic redundancy as on any particular set of syntactic, phonological, or lexical items, and

g. that there is a type of knowledge of language which is distinct from the sum of syntactic, phonological, and lexical knowledge which is reflected in scores on listening and reading comprehension, structure, and vocabulary discrete point tests.

Many of these hypotheses will be modified or elaborated on as more evidence is brought to bear. Others may become the dogma of the future, inhibiting us from making other valid discoveries. But for now, they seem to point towards a new and meaningful synthesis for applied linguistics.

Let us examine the kinds of tests that have grown out of

these ideas. Oller's cloze test is probably one of the best known. It requires the person tested to draw upon hypotheses that cut across the boundaries of syntax and vocabulary. It relies on linguistic context and involves communication, to some extent, of real content.

Spolsky's oral cloze does all of the same and, in addition, tests at least the linguistic aspects of the redundancy required for communication.

Both of these cloze tests are aimed at measuring some global indication of what is often called communicative competence, the ability to use the foreign language appropriately in a social situation. A. Palmer's COM-TEST, PRE-TEST, and AC-TEST form another kind of test that aims at finding and measuring an oral communication ability that is not measured, even indirectly, by typical foreign language proficiency tests. Palmer's aim was to find a way of measuring this ability more objectively and reliably than could be done in an oral interview.

However, in all three of these tests, the two cloze and the oral tests, several important considerations have been bypassed. First, consider the question of validity. Regardless of the claim that the ability to communicate is being tested, the testing schemes are artificial -- interesting, ingenious games with little obvious validity beyond that of a very elementary sort as far as performance -- ability to function in real communicative situations -- is concerned. Furthermore, from personal experience with written cloze techniques, we would predict that the irritation factor these tests engender with some students could be shown to be a source of significant interference. Results of a study of the aural cloze as administered for several years in Sweden indicate that a combination of personality factors

not having to do with language ability interfere with some students' performance. Additionally, the aural cloze tests sentence-level phenomena only and does not provide the situational and contextual redundancy which is part of any communication situation.

A second consideration has to do with efficiency, a much sought-after goal in testing. The question is whether some inexpensive, easily administered and graded clever device can possibly yield interesting test results. One can assume that the advanced non-native speaker has already developed analyzing and synthesizing competences in the foreign language. The questions which are interesting, then, are those that an expectancy grammar, functional and discourse considerations pose: questions of appropriateness, situational adequacy, rhetoric, style, register, presupposition, relevant cultural and psychological factors, logic, and all the finer points of encoding and decoding which linguistic theory has only recently begun to touch upon. In other words, it is only the more mechanical linguistic skills which can be tested "efficiently."

A third consideration is that of scope. From what we have just said, it should be apparent that tests at the advanced level should be as wide in scope as the functional performance goals that the student sets for himself, because there is no absolute criterion for measuring foreign language proficiency.

This brings us to a fourth consideration -- the criterion of meaningfulness, meaningfulness to the student, the teacher, and the related institution or agency. Though the adult student is often eager to know comparative ratings with other students, what really matters to him is how well he can perform in relation to his immediate or long term goals. It is a well-recognized fact that learning

is facilitated to the extent that the learner is an active, rather than passive participant in the learning process and has the opportunity to set targets and goals for himself. When a test helps the student, the teacher, and the institution measure how far the student has moved in the direction of his targets and goals, it can be said to satisfy the meaningfulness criterion. It is difficult to visualize a way in which the tests we have been considering could be said to do this.

The fifth consideration, an extension of the fourth, has to do with what we might call "testing in the context of learning." It is a truism that one never learns a language completely. This is especially evident to the second language learner. Since language is too complex and extensive a subject for even a linguist to characterize completely, the best a teacher can do is to help make the learner's linguistic sensitivity more available to him so that after the teacher has done all he can, the learner can go on acquiring on his own. Within this framework, the test should serve several purposes.

First, it should give the learner a sense of satisfaction that he is progressing. (This means that he would not take the test until there is reason to believe that he is ready for it, that he would do well on it.) Besides the obvious desirability of this, there is evidence that success breeds motivation for further success, a motivation in depth as compared to the superficiality of statements learners often give about how motivated they are.

The second purpose is to keep the curriculum focused on real targets. If the targets of the learner and the course are the same, as defined in some concrete way, then the instruction should be maximally productive.

Still a third purpose should be to keep the teacher free to explore his intuitions about the learning process and about the nature of what each student needs to learn. This is especially important in light of the implications of the notion of interlanguages for syllabus revision.

In summary, tests should be flexible enough to accomodate the findings that emerge from the teaching/learning process, while maintaining as much situational realism as is necessary for genuine communicative performance in a way as meaningful to the student, teacher, and institution as possible.

Given this, then, with what do we replace the sacrosanct old syllabus? We would suggest something similar to what Wilkins calls the notional syllabus. This is a syllabus which is built around the uses to which the language will be put. The Performance Objectives Pilot Project of the Texas Migrant Children Program has already been experimenting with ideas such as these, for reasons similar to those we give here. Their test meets the criterion of meaningfulness because each test task is a real communicative one of immediate and vital interest to the children being tested and, rather than interfering with the learning process, clearly enhances it.

What sort of goals might adult professionals attempting to function in a foreign language have? In the kind of program we shall consider, their goals are defined by the tasks their jobs entail. Given the one's ability to function in a foreign language situation cannot be accurately determined by typical linguistic criteria, we must look to functional criteria to provide an adequate means of measuring. We propose that this be done by what we call "functional language analysis."

Functional language analysis is an approach to foreign language evaluation which we have adapted from methods of manpower analysis. It is a system in which foreign language proficiency, or communicative competence, or -- as we call it -- "functional language level" is measured in terms of the non-native speaker's ability to perform a set of tasks in the foreign language. Although this notion can also be interpreted in terms of the typical high school and university foreign language program, we shall discuss it in relation to language programs affiliated with government, business, and international organizations whose objective it is to bring non-native speakers to a level of foreign language proficiency that will allow them to function in specific jobs in the new language on a job-performance par with similarly-educated native speakers.

Since foreign language proficiency is relative to the context in which it is used, language programs need a reliable way of getting explicit information about what students will be required to do in their jobs. With this information, the nature of each student's job can be evaluated for the level of functional language required, and performance targets can be set up, in consultation with the student and his job supervisor. One's functional language level is to be determined on the basis of his performing pertinent tasks. Defining the nature of these tasks is of utmost importance because a language program must ensure a consistent and uniform understanding between itself and the institution and employee involved about what courses of study will be most productive and best serve the needs of the institution and the employee. The relationship between these parties is likely to be substantially less productive that it could be if the language program teaches from one understanding of what is

important for the student to learn, and the institution evaluates the student's progress and the language program from another understanding, and the student himself acts upon still another set of assumptions and expectations. How can a common understanding be articulated by a language program?

A beginning can be made by analyzing each student's job description, in consultation with his immediate supervisor. Job descriptions do not usually contain explicit enough information because they are phrased to reflect management's emphasis on the results of an individual's performance and to meet personal goals such as justifying a desired status and/or salary. Rarely is a serious attempt made to delineate explicitly what the individual does. We must distinguish between what the individual is expected to do and what the expected results of his actions are. Then we must determine what the fundamental units of work are and what communicative activities are associated with them. Fine and Wiley (1971) define the fundamental unit of work as the task. That is, jobs are made up of groups of tasks. Foreign language instruction should be designed to help the advanced student to perform a set of work tasks in the foreign language as effectively as he would perform those tasks in his own. Language proficiency evaluation is then based on how well the individual handles relevant tasks using the new language. Not only will the language program teach to its evaluative measures, but in addition the test will shape the notional syllabus.

How do we define a task? The following is a combination of systems analysis and the functional job analysis approach of Fine and Wiley:

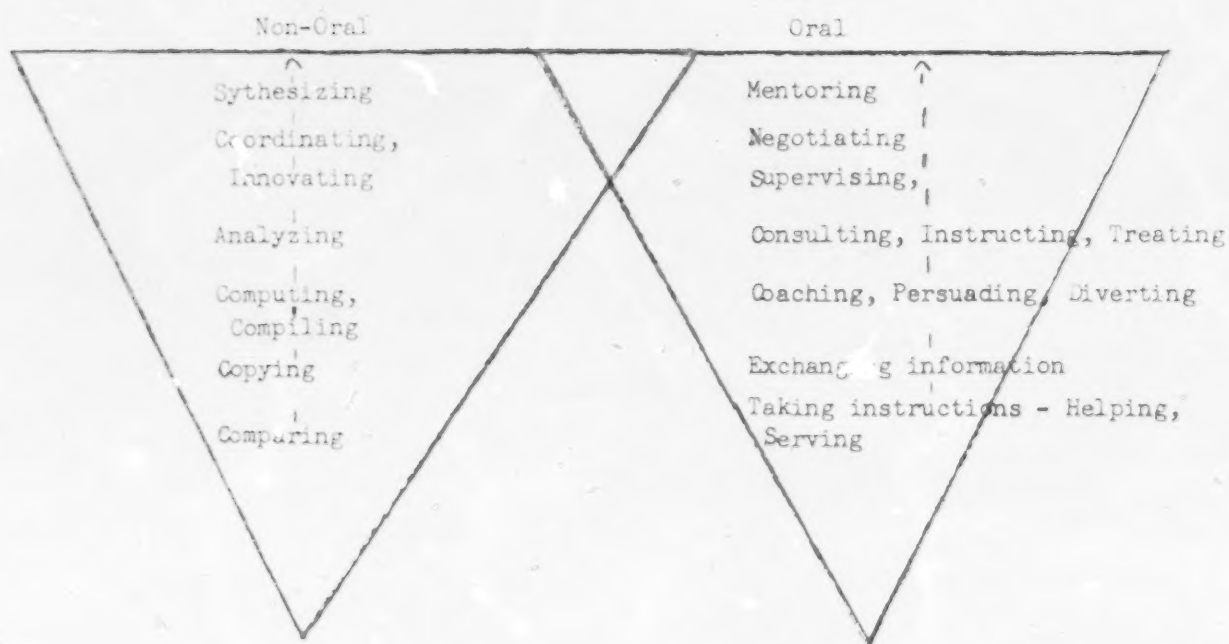
A task is an action or an action sequence grouped through time designed to contribute

a specific end result to the accomplishment of an objective and for which functional levels and/or orientation can be reliably assigned.

Here we part company with Fine and Wiley to say that, further, a task may entail primarily oral or non-oral communication. In describing the action, explicit phrasing should be used. For example, ask questions, listen to answers, record answers on a form. Phrasing which describes processes and is open to wide interpretation should be avoided. For example, develop a program, prepare a proposal, interview a client are descriptions which are too broad to be useful. Explicit information enables the language program and the individual and his supervisor to set up language performance objectives which can be arranged into a set of targets which the individual will work toward and measure himself against. His progress will be judged by the program and the institution on the same basis--on his ability to function in the target situations. Linguistic criteria are relevant only if, and to the extent that lack of intuitive knowledge of certain facts about English inhibits adequate performance of a given task. For example, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which the performance of a task depended upon knowing that advice is a noncount noun, although knowledge of this fact is tested in virtually every proficiency test we have looked at. However, if it were true that this error proved so irritating to native speakers as to affect the non-native speaker's ability to function effectively in a work task, then this grammatical distinction would have to be included in the set formed by the intersection of non-linguistic and linguistic conditions necessary for the performance of a specified task.

Because all tasks do not require the same level of foreign language proficiency, it is necessary to distinguish among tasks on the basis of the varying levels of foreign language performance required. Fine and Wiley identify three primitives with which all jobs require some interaction: data ("information, ideas, facts, and statistics"), people, and things ("physical interaction with tangibles"). For our purposes, the scales can be translated into Language Function Scales. (See Figure 1.) These enable one to compare what employees do in terms of the level (i.e., relative

Figure 1
Language Function Scales



Note: These functions are hierarchically ordered in that each successively higher function is to be interpreted as including those below it. Commas separate functions on the same level.

complexity) and orientation (i.e., proportional involvement with oral and non-oral communication) of their particular tasks. The relative complexity of any task to another can be expressed by choosing the function that best describes the kind of behavior required to perform a given task effectively. The ordinal position of the function is the level measure. The orientation is determined by assessing the proportion of oral to non-oral task requirement. Looking at them from the bottom up, each level is to be interpreted as including those below it. Each term in the scales is defined, at least tentatively, in Table 1.

Table 1

The following scales are adapted from Fine and Wiley, 1971. Definitions of terms are virtually verbatim.

Oral Function Scale

<u>Level</u>	<u>Definition</u>
1	TAKING INSTRUCTIONS-HELPING Attends to the work assignment, instructions, or orders of supervisor. No immediate response or verbal exchange is required unless clarification of instructions is needed. SERVING Attends to the needs or requests of people, or to the expressed or implicit wishes of people. Immediate verbal response is involved.
2	EXCHANGING INFORMATION Talks to, converses with, and/or signals people to convey or obtain information, or to clarify and work out details of an assignment within the framework of well-established procedures.

3

COACHING

Befriends and encourages individuals on a personal, caring basis by approximating a peer or family relationship either in a one-to-one or small group situation; gives instruction, advice, and personal assistance concerning activities of daily living, the use of various instructional services, and participation in groups.

PERSUADING

Influences others in favor of a product, service, or point of view by talks or demonstrations.

DIVERTING

Amuses to entertain or distract individuals and/or audiences or to lighten a situation.

4

CONSULTING

Serves as a source of technical information and gives such information or provides ideas to define, clarify, enlarge upon, or sharpen procedures, capabilities, or product specifications (e.g., informs individuals/families about details of working out objectives such as adoption, school selection, and vocational rehabilitation; assists them in working out plans and guides implementation of plans).

INSTRUCTING

Teaches subject matter to others or trains others through explanation, demonstration and testing.

TREATING

Acts on or interacts with individuals or small groups of people who need help (as in sickness) to carry out specialized therapeutic or adjustment procedures. Systematically observes results of treatment within the framework of total personal behavior because unique individual reactions to prescriptions (chemical, physical, or behavioral) may not fall within the range of prediction. Motivates, supports, and instructs individuals to accept or cooperate with therapeutic procedures when necessary.

5

SUPERVISING

Determines and/or interprets work procedure for a group of workers; assigns specific duties to them (delineating prescribed and discretionary content); maintains harmonious relations among them; evaluates performance (both prescribed and discretionary) and promotes efficiency and other organizational values; makes decisions on procedural and technical levels.

6

NEGOTIATING

Bargains and discusses on a formal basis as a representative of one side of a transaction for advantages in resources, rights, privileges, and/or contractual obligations, "giving and taking" within the limits provided by authority or within the framework of the perceived requirements and integrity of a program.

7

MENTORING

Works with individuals having problems affecting their life adjustment in order to advise, counsel, and/or guide them according to legal, scientific, clinical, spiritual, and/or other professional principles. Advises clients on implications of analyses or diagnoses made of problems, courses of action open to deal with them, and merits of one strategy over another.

Non-oral Function Scale

Level	Definition
1	COMPARING Selects, sorts, or arranges data, judging whether their readily observable functional, structural, or compositional characteristics are similar to or different from prescribed standards.
2	COPYING Transcribes, enters and/or posts data, following a schema or plan to assemble or make things and using a variety of work aids.
3	COMPUTING Performs arithmetic operations and makes reports and/or carries out a prescribed action in relation to them. COMPILING Gathers, collects, or classifies information about data, people, or things, following a schema or system but using discretion in application.
4	ANALYZING Examines and evaluates data with reference to the criteria, standards, and/or requirements of a particular discipline, art, technique, or craft to determine interaction effects (consequences) and to consider alternatives.
5	INNOVATING Modifies, alters, and/or adapts existing designs, procedures, or methods to meet unique specifications, unusual conditions, or specific standards of effectiveness within the overall framework of operating theories, principles, and/or organizational contexts. COORDINATING Decides time, place and sequence of operations of a process, system, or organization, and/or the need for revision of goals, policies (boundary conditions), or procedures on the basis of analysis of data and of performance review of pertinent objectives and requirements. Includes overseeing and/or detailing decisions and/or reporting on events.

SYNTHESIZING

Takes off in new directions on the basis of personal intuitions, feelings, and ideas (with or without regard for tradition, experience, and existing parameters) to conceive new approaches to or statements of problems and the development of system, operational, or aesthetic "solutions" or "resolutions" of them, typically outside of existing theoretical, stylistic, or organizational context.

For each student, these definitions must be elaborated by a set of illustrative tasks which describe what the employee is expected to do. For example, an individual who is required to function at level 4 on the non-oral function scale -- analyzing -- might be assigned the task of evaluating suggestions for improving Tokyo's urban transport system, weighing cost and other factors in order to give a written evaluation of the relative merits of the suggestion.

The Language Function Scales also make some empirical claims about the relative degree of difficulty in performing these functions in the second language -- claims about access to cognitive skills when operating in the second language. In first language development, there are limits to how much pragmatic mapping can be handled at any one developmental stage. Adult second language learners often appear to have difficulties with "logic" and "clear thinking" in the second language. In part, this is due to mismatches between their inter-language and the idealized native speaker grammar. But we can speculate further that second language acquisition reflects certain aspects -- probably having to do with overload on short and long

term memory -- of maturational stages.

To summarize, the stages of language learning that the advanced student goes through and that we want to test are natural, not linguistic ones. The learner's grammar does not match that of an idealized native speaker in many ways, but since we assume no linguistic progression from simpler to more complex constructions at this stage, we cannot test for them. There are no discrete points to be tested. Instead, we look for ability to handle tasks, judging this ability by performance criteria. We specifically avoid, first, the error-focused judgments common to many objective tests, and, secondly, the analysis of purely phonological, syntactic, and lexical phenomena generally appealed to in diagnostic testing. Instead, evaluation is to be made along the parameters represented in the preliminary sketch in the Table 2 .

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Table 2

Initial Selection of Evaluation Criteria

	Oral		Non-oral	
	Recognition	Production	Recognition	Production
Continuity of Communication	x	x	x	x
Continuity of Discourse	x	x	x	x
Directness of L-S Contact and Distractors	x	x	-	-
Speed Slow as/Speed as Irritation Factors	x	x	x	x
Other Irritation Factors	-	x	-	-
Ability to Recognize and Respond to Communication Breakdown	x	x	-	x
Roles				
Style	x	x	x	x
Register	x	x	-	-

All of these must still be analyzed into more specific descriptions. However, setting them up in this preliminary way does provide a framework for further investigations into the nature of functional foreign language proficiency.

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